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Our Church in Cyprus.

A SERMON

PREACHED BY

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AT THE

Consecration of the Church of St. Paul,

AT NICOSIA,

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EZEKIEL xi. 16.

Although I have scattered them among the countries, yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come.

WE have just consecrated, or set apart by a solemn ceremony of prayer and praise, this comely edifice which the English people residing in Cyprus have erected for the public performance of divine worship according to the rites of our own national Church. We have prayed God to vouchsafe His presence here, to accept this service at our hands, and to crown it with such success as may further His glory and the good of His redeemed people. And if our prayers have ascended from true and believing hearts, we nothing doubt but that they have reached the ear of God, and have won from Him a heavenly blessing.

It may appear to some who are unaware of the special difficulties which we have had to surmount that we have been long in completing this pious work. Eight years have all but passed since this fair isle of Cyprus came under British rule. Very much has been done during those eight years to promote the temporal and material welfare of the island and of all who dwell here. Roads have been constructed. Trees have been planted, and forests conserved. Official residences have been built. The plague which hitherto had periodically

devastated the crops has been almost wholly extinguished. Nor has the moral good of the people been neglected. Equal laws have been made and enforced for both powerful and weak, for both rich and poor. The inhabitants now enjoy freedom, security, justice, and a degree of self-government such as they never possessed before. Steps also have been taken to extend and improve the education of the young. But though in the very year when we first set foot on Cyprus the project of erecting an English Church was started, nearly eight years have been allowed to elapse before the project has been brought to fulfilment. This delay, however, cannot fairly be regarded as betokening indifference on our part to our religious needs. Ever since we first took the island under our sway divine service has been regularly held by ordained ministers of our Church, if not in a consecrated building, yet in rooms exclusively reserved for this holy purpose. If spire or tower of an English church was not seen at once to rise heavenwards, marking the hallowed spot where Sunday after Sunday our people in obedience to inspired precept assembled themselves together for public worship, it should be remembered that our countrymen here are few in number, and hardly able without assistance from outside to build a church. A year or two ago a site was promised by the English Government. As there were no funds which the Government could employ for this purpose, this was all the aid it gave, or could be expected to give. Appeals from time to time were addressed to English Churchmen at home. But such appeals met with little response. The fact was that the island,

having basked for a few short hours in the sunshine of popular favour, suddenly fell into disrepute. It was found to contain no hidden mines of wealth such as adventurers expected. Political power in England changing hands, none could predict for certain whether we should retain or abandon the island. Contributions for the erection of an English church soon came to an end. The two Societies which had striven with zealous rivalry to be first in sending a Chaplain to the island abruptly withdrew their aid. Such are among the discouragements which we have had to face in executing this work. But God be thanked, these discouragements have been bravely encountered: and to-day we see our hopes fulfilled, the church completed, and dedicated for all time to the service of God.

This is not the first English church which has been erected in Cyprus. Only a mile from this spot are to be seen the remains of a desecrated edifice, beautiful even in its ruins, which tradition affirms to have been one of the most famous among the many famous churches which once adorned the city of Nicosia, and to have borne the name of St. Nicolas of the English. If tradition speak true in this matter, the church was built by the Order, half-religious half-military, of St. Thomas of Acre. The Order took Becket for its patron, having been founded by his sister, and possessing a hospital and church on the site of the house in London where Becket was born. On the fall of Acre, and the withdrawal of the Crusaders from the Holy Land, this Order secured a home at Nicosia, where they erected this church of which I speak. Here the Master, Prior, and Custodes of the Order were ap-

pointed to their offices. Here they performed their solemn rites and ceremonies. Here they fulfilled the ordinary duties of public worship after the forms in use among our countrymen six hundred years ago. No wonder that on our attention being drawn to this picturesque ruin we were fired with a desire to rescue it from its present degradation, and convert it anew into an English church. We felt that whatever its history, whether tradition was right or wrong, whether it was or was not the church originally built by funds from London and the seat of English worship in olden days, we should have in it a bond connecting us with the historic past, a bond connecting us, if not with this knightly Order of Englishmen, yet with our Cypriot brethren, who undoubtedly worshipped here before the church was seized and defaced by the Turks. But the project was found to be impracticable. The difficulties which Turkish law presented, the inconvenience of the situation, the impossibility of obtaining funds from England sufficient to restore the building and keep it in repair, forced us to abandon the enterprise and build a church elsewhere.

It may be well that I should now briefly state the purpose which this new English church is intended to fulfil. First let me assure the Metropolitan and other authorities of the Greek Church who have honoured us by their presence to-day, that it is not meant to interfere in any way with the ecclesiastical institutions of this island. Belonging ourselves to a Church which was founded, if not by apostolic hands, at any rate in apostolic days, and can trace from those early days the pedigree of its Bishops in unbroken succession, we are constrained

by very sympathy to respect the privileges of one more ancient even than our own, as founded by Barnabas and Paul in their first missionary journey. It has ever been the practice of the Church of England to treat with reverence the rights of sister Churches. But there are special reasons why reverence should be accorded to rights possessed by the Church of Cyprus. If we have read anything of ecclesiastical history, we must remember the jealousy with which those rights have been always guarded. We know how in the fifth century the neighbouring See of Antioch, availing itself of the opportunity presented by the political subjection of Cyprus to Antioch, attempted to bring it into ecclesiastical subjection also. We know how stoutly the attempt was resisted, and the threatened rights maintained. Whether we regard the statement put forward by the Metropolitan of this island and his suffragans at the Council of Ephesus that "never from the apostolic age had any extraneous hand imparted to Cyprus the gift of ordination," as having been proved or not, the Council decreed, as though the statement had been proved, that the Prelates of Cyprus should "enjoy the rights they claimed of allegiance to no Patriarch, free from molestation and violence." When fifty years later in the face of this decree the See of Antioch once more revived its claim of authority over the island, we know how successfully it was again resisted, and how the question was finally set at rest for ever by the alleged discovery in the neighbourhood of Constantia of the body of St. Barnabas with a copy of St. Matthew's Gospel on its breast. Rights so ancient, so loyally and tenaciously upheld, and in themselves so rea-

sonable, no true son of our Church could ever dream of infringing.

Among the many important lessons which we have learnt since that olden time when our countrymen worshipped in the church of St. Nicolas here is the lesson of toleration. We have learnt to tolerate, to respect, to treat as sacred the religious opinions, principles, forms and usages of sister Churches, however much they may differ from our own. Such toleration was a thing unknown when Richard of England, in revenge for the plunder of his vessels wrecked off Limassol yonder, and for the insult offered to his betrothed, Berengaria of Navarre, by the tyrant Duke of Cyprus, unhorsed him in single combat, and sent him bound in silver fetters to Tripoli. No sooner had Isaac Comnenus been dethroned by England's lion-hearted king, and Guy of Lusignan made Lord or Seigneur of the island in his stead, than a Latin Archbishop was seated at Nicosia, with Latin Suffragans at Famagosta, Limassol, and Baffo ; Latin in place of Greek was made the language of the Church ; and the Greek clergy, having lost their territorial rank and property, were made subject to the Latin Metropolitan. Many were forced to quit the island, and their benefices transferred to Latin ecclesiastics from the kingdom of Jerusalem in compensation for losses sustained in Palestine at the hands of Saladin. Not until the Turks had wrested Cyprus from the Venetians in the sixteenth century, was the Greek Church able to recover her ancient prerogatives and her autocephalous Archbishop.

No repetition of such interference with the historic rights of their Church have our Christian

brethren in Cyprus to fear at the hands of English Churchmen in the present day. Attached as we are to the worship and discipline of our own Church, we have not the will, even had we the power, to force our usages upon sister Churches. As we have no thought of changing our own rites and ceremonies, we have no thought of asking our Eastern brethren to change theirs. Lovers of liberty, we are anxious to promote, not to prejudice the independence of sister Churches. The ecclesiastical rulers of this island may feel assured that no proselytizing inroads will be made upon their flocks from this English church which they now see erected on their soil. They may feel assured that no seeds of discord or schism will be planted among their people by the English clergy who shall have authority here to exercise their ministry. They may feel assured that in Cyprus as elsewhere, Englishmen will be true to their traditional policy of upholding the principle of national, independent, self-governed Churches. We may think that reform is needed in many an eastern Communion. We may think that the Churches in eastern lands have been too stationary, too reluctant to admit change, too apt to centre their affections on the past. But whatever defects we find, or fancy that we find, in these ancient Churches, all generous natures will acknowledge with gratitude the long and noble service which these Churches have rendered to the cause of Christ. But for these ancient Churches, every vestige of Christian truth, every vestige of Christian worship, every vestige of Christian principle would long ago have perished in the East. What if the Church in Cyprus has not moved with

the times, has not kept abreast of modern thought and progress, has not caught the spirit of this busy, enquiring, restless age, can we wonder? During long centuries Cyprus has been isolated from the outer world. If ever visitors from the mainland set foot on her shores, they came to pillage, to massacre, to misgovern, to enslave. The spirit of her people has been broken by ages of misrule; and during this continuous night of crushing bondage no succouring hand was ever held forth to her by western Christendom.

The church which we have just consecrated, though its gates are open to all, whatever their nationality, whatever their religion, is built exclusively for our own people. It is built because Englishmen require, when they meet for public worship, that the services should be conducted in a language which they all understand, and according to the forms of their own communion. It is built also because we hold that in all countries under our sway we should declare by an outward and visible sign that we are a Christian people. The church is a public announcement of our Christianity. It is a public proclamation that we are Christians not simply as individuals but as a nation. At home our Church is part of the nation's polity. And when we leave home, so far as we are able, we carry our Church with us to foreign lands; we worship according to her distinctive rites, and in buildings hallowed by her blessing; religion is an element in our government; moral and spiritual renewal, no less than material progress, a principle of our rule.

But when I say that this edifice is built exclusively for members of our own communion, I must

not be supposed to mean that persons belonging to other communions, or having other religions, will not be free to enter within its walls, if they be so minded. No : though it is not intended for Greek, Armenian, or Maronite, yet if Greek, Armenian, or Maronite be anxious to learn the distinguishing principles, doctrines, and worship of our Church, he will find here a welcome ; though it is not intended for Jews or Mohammedans, yet to such also a glad welcome will be accorded, if dissatisfied with their own religion, they desire to be instructed in the religion of Christ. As the door of our sympathies is open to all the inhabitants of Cyprus, so the door of this church will be open to all who choose to cross its threshold. We hope that indirectly it may be helpful to many besides ourselves, and especially to our brethren of the Greek Church. As there must be many a lesson which we may learn from them, so there may be many a lesson which they might learn from ourselves. Both Churches indeed are already at one in all the more important elements of our common religion. We are at one in the reverence we pay to the same Holy Scriptures. We are at one in having the same creeds, the same Apostolic orders, the same Sacraments. We are at one in building our faith, and in moulding our characters upon the same great doctrines of a crucified and risen Saviour, proclaimed on the birthday of the Church here by the Apostles Barnabas and Paul. But this common ground, wide as it is already, is capable of being still further widened, if members of the two sister Churches would only open their ears to what each has to teach the other. There may be Englishmen who would be none the

worse for having brought home to them the importance of walking in the old paths and not breaking with the past, the duty of precision in doctrinal statements, the value of outward forms, outward ordinances of devotion, outward rules of self-discipline. So there may be among our Cypriot brethren some who need to be exhorted to act in the living present, to grow with the world's growth, to ally themselves with progress, to travel in company with civilization. There may be some who require to be taught that morality and true religion are inseparable, and that while the moral nature, however carefully trained, cannot of itself engender the spiritual life, the spiritual life without morality will wither and die. There may be some again who need to be reminded that necessary as outward forms are to foster the spirit of devotion, they are means and not ends, and that unduly multiplied they stifle that very devotion which they are meant to sustain: that the religion of Christ is essentially a religion of truth, a religion of righteousness, a religion of personal holiness, a religion of love to man issuing from love to God.

May the opportunities of mutual intercourse, influence, and instruction, which our position here affords, produce mutual knowledge, mutual reverence, and mutual affection between the Church of England and the historic Churches of the East; and so hasten the day when we shall be all of one heart and of one soul, united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity.





